

Wayang in Jaman Now: Reflexive Traditionalization and Local, National, and Global Networks of
Javanese Shadow Puppet Theatre

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Abstract

Doomsayers and traditionalists prognosticate that the dominance of digital media spells the end of traditional arts in Java, Indonesia. *Wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre), while still highly regarded as theatrical heritage, is said to be under particular threat due to the long duration of its plays, complexity of language and the need for prior knowledge of characters and situations. Such features are at odds with the short attention spans and need for instant comprehension and gratification of Gen Z – the youth referred to in Indonesian media as inhabiting *jaman now* (literally, ‘the time of now’). While digital social media, including Facebook and YouTube, definitely offer up alternate forms of entertainment and amusement, they are also being used by traditional puppet practitioners to reinforce and expand communities of practice. Facebook provides platforms for comparative discussion and critical debate, while YouTube potentiates the inclusion of a geographically dispersed audience, including overseas workers.

Biography

Matthew Isaac Cohen is Professor of International Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. His books include *The Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theater in Colonial Indonesia, 1891-1903*; *Performing Otherness: Java and Bali on International Stages, 1905-1952*; and *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia*. He has been studying the practice of Javanese shadow puppetry since 1988, and in 2018 was awarded the royal name Ki Dalang Bawana (Honourable Puppeteer of the World) by the sultan of the royal court of Kasepuhan for his services to the puppet tradition of Cirebon, West Java.

Keywords

Wayang kulit, shadow puppetry, social media, networks, Indonesia

Wayang, a ‘community of forms’ of western Indonesia that includes rod and shadow puppetry, but also other arts, is produced in its own distinctive networks.¹ Traditionally manifested in craft villages and local schools of practice, these networks have transformed in the digital communication age. Indonesians regularly fret about the dangers of hand-held devices for traditional cultures. Cultural commentators worry that Gen Z, the generation coming of age in today’s post-traditional society, referred to in Indonesian internet and media parlance as *jaman now* (literally, the ‘period of now’), are unable to enjoy wayang as they are attuned to cultural products that are easily accessible, fast-paced, and instantly gratifying. In contrast to the doomsayers who view digital media as wayang’s end, I wish to demonstrate, drawing on theoretical insights from sociologist Scott Lash, that there are processes of ‘reflexive traditionalization’ of social media at work in the networks of Indonesian traditional arts. That is to say, digital social media serve to reinforce a commitment to the internal good of craft and support ‘the ethics of commitment and obligation’ to the puppetry community in order to ensure a future for wayang as an art form.²

I focus here on traditions of Javanese *wayang kulit* or shadow puppet theatre, the most widespread of wayang forms. This art is customarily passed down from generation to generation. *Dhalang* (puppeteers) practicing *wayang kulit* inherit a large repertoire of dramatizations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which they retell in constantly-updated versions to primarily rural audiences. Post-traditional forms of *wayang kulit*, radically departing from established dramaturgical norms, exist alongside traditional local performance styles, and sometimes the same *dhalang* is conversant and comfortable in both traditional and post-traditional redactions.³ But I am concerned in this context predominately with networks of traditional *wayang kulit* in order to counter-balance the dominant impression internationally that *wayang kulit* (like other traditional performance forms in present-day Asia--- *jingju*, *bhharatanatyam*, *khon* etc) are important as ‘root’ sources to be appropriated by contemporary practitioners (whether in the US, Europe, Australia or Asia) but are static objects of ‘mere’ ethnographic interest otherwise. Such forms are regularly not recognized as coevalness: they are not viewed as occupying the same historical moment as our own but rather

considered as archaic ancestors or completely irrelevant to the contemporary.⁴ In other words, they are viewed as outside *jaman now*—unless processed as raw materials for Rasaboxes™, Barba-style ‘theatre anthropology,’ ‘ethnic fusion’ music and equivalents.⁵ This consideration of the intertwining of traditions of Javanese shadow puppetry with contemporary social media used daily and familiar to most readers of this article—Facebook and YouTube-- is an intervention against such pigeonholing.

Tradition here is taken here not as something fixed, inviolate or sacrosanct, but rather, leaning on Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, as a set of inherited practices, a tacit sense of knowing how to perform in the absence of clearly formulated rules or prescriptions.⁶ Internal argument about how a tradition is defined is not sign of infirmity but robust health for MacIntyre—e.g., ‘the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew.’⁷ Traditions alter when confronting other traditions that provide better solutions for real-world issues and die when they can no longer accommodate new ideas. Drawing on the terms of sociologist Anthony Giddens, traditions will always have their ‘guardians’ who have access to arcane knowledge and whose status insures continuity over generations. But equally vital are the ‘experts’ operating in the public sphere by negotiating old ideas with the new, reformulating practices and re-articulating their nature and present-day merit.⁸

Wayang networks in village Java: The case of Gegesik

Wayang in village Java up through the 1980s, when I began my own wayang studies, was primarily an oral tradition transmitted through local networks. Networks of this sort have been described and theorized by sociologist Howard Becker and his colleagues as ‘theatre communities’ ‘in which people who live close to each other routinely collaborate to produce more or less similar works.’⁹ Puppeteers were – and largely still are – born into puppeteer families, and learned their craft by going along to performances with family, sitting on stage and watching attentively, learning the various gamelan musical instruments that accompany wayang by substituting for members of the

troupe when there was a vacancy, playing with puppets and re-enacting performances witnessed at home (sometimes with other children as musicians), asking questions of established puppeteers, listening in on conversations among elders and—very occasionally—getting some concrete pointers. Some older puppeteers were illiterate but possessed fabulous memories and could keep in mind well over 100 different play structures, stock phrases and exchanges, *sulukan* (fragments of Old Javanese poetry sung at appropriate moments in a play), a wide variety of accompanying musical pieces, magical incantations, genealogies, family histories and other sorts of knowledge.

Puppeteers, gamelan musicians and wayang makers were often clustered in villages and small towns known locally as centres for puppetry arts. The town of Gegesik (Cirebon, West Java), where I lived for much of the 1990s, had a dozen active *wayang kulit* troupes, all headed by members of an extended family, all practicing individual variants of the local style or school (*kaol*) of puppetry.

About half of Gegesik's troupes were completely autonomous—meaning that the puppeteers who headed them had their own musicians under exclusive contract and their own sets of puppets and gamelan instruments. These troupes tended to perform in excess of 80 times a year. The rest shared equipment and musicians amongst them. All benefited from living in close proximity. Bookers who travelled to Gegesik from out of town who discovered that their preferred puppeteer was not available on a particular day could visit another who lived nearby. Artists were often visiting each other's houses, going off together to social functions or performances in other towns and villages, or holding impromptu soirees to discuss trade secrets. A communally-funded, week-long wayang festival called Saptawara was organized collectively by the puppeteers to celebrate this local heritage and act as a mode of knowledge exchange. The town had a strong sense of civic pride, in part a reflex of development money that flowed into Gegesik at the start of the Green Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁰ Micro-politics and competition were omnipresent but puppeteers were proud of their shared craft and committed to a local cultural identity, with all the obligations entailed. Local pundits dubbed Gegesik an artist's warehouse (*gudang seniman*) or the Ubud of

Cirebon, in reference to the famed centre of Balinese arts and culture, and the Gegesik style was widely imitated, particularly in the neighbouring regency of Indramayu.

These Gegesik puppeteers were full participants in modernity—they made occasional trips to Cirebon’s elite shopping plaza Grage Mall after it opened in 1995; were consuming films made in Hollywood, India and China; critically watching television broadcasts of both *wayang golek* performed by puppeteers from Sunda (in the southern part of West Java) and *wayang kulit* performed by puppeteers from Central Java; and occasionally reading books on a variety of subjects—books were considered in one puppeteer’s terms to provide useful ‘guidelines’ (*pedoman*) for performing.¹¹ They were generally interested in talking to me and valued my perspective on their art form, an art which gradually I internalized and took on as my own. But it was the local networks which were at the core of the Gegesik sub-style. New puppets, when needed, were commissioned from the Gegesik puppet maker Sawiyah. Paintings on glass of wayang figures and scenes to adorn the houses of puppeteers were purchased from locally-famous Gegesik painters such as Rastika or Bahendi. When sponsors requested that a day-time *topeng* (mask dance) performance precede a night-time *wayang kulit* performance, puppeteers hired preferentially one of the local *topeng* troupes. Gegesik puppeteers performed far and wide in Java—from Pandegelang in the far west of the *pesisir* (north coast) to Tegal (in central Java). Their primary *alas* (performing turf, literally ‘forest’), however, has always been the northwest of the regency of Cirebon—villages adjacent to Gegesik.

The most networked Gegesik puppeteer in the 1990s was Haji Mansyur, who commanded the highest fees, performed most frequently among his Gegesik peers and was the chapter head of the national, neo-governmental puppeteer union Pepadi for the regency of Cirebon. This position of local authority privileged him as a point of contact for outsiders interested in local wayang traditions. He headed juries at festivals, advised on cultural policy to the local and provincial governments, attended meetings of puppeteers in Bandung, Jakarta and other cities, and selected puppeteers for inclusion in broadcasts of *wayang kulit* on the provincial state television channel,

TVRI Bandung. He himself was often recorded on audiocassette by Dian Records. He devotedly watched wayang television broadcasts by Sundanese and Central Javanese puppeteers, gleaning what he could of television aesthetics—particularly decorative elements (*dekor*) such as potted plants and over-sized *kayon* painted on wood to frame the screen-- to create televisual ambience in his own live performances.¹² Mansyur's performances had a sense of decorum and gravitas, derived in part from his networking, which distinguished him from his peers.

Playing with Facebook

While face-to-face contact and oral-aural modes of transmission remain vitally significant, these are today supplemented by texting, Facebook, YouTube and other modes of electronic communication. Innovative, post-traditional strands of wayang achieve high visibility in this sphere, but even village puppeteers are avid consumers and producers of digital media who operate in awareness of and contribute to global mediascapes.

These recent developments in the globalization of wayang have precedents which might be traced back to at least the nineteenth century. Wayang's shift from a locally produced and consumed art form to a national and international theatrical form manifested through various channels—collecting and exhibition of wayang puppets; publication of texts; puppets produced for mass markets; sound recordings; modern institutions of training; radio (and later television) broadcasts; the use of wayang for advertising and propaganda; and the creation of modern wayang forms speaking to international and pan-local issues and cosmopolitan aspirations.¹³ Through these developments wayang became amenable to inclusion in non-local assemblages, discourses and networks.

These earlier advances have shaped the performance and representation of wayang in profound, if sometimes unrecognized ways. But in relation to how they impacted on the constitution of wayang networks, they pale in significance to the changes wrought through digital culture in the last 15 years or so. While conducting my doctoral and postdoctoral fieldwork in Gegesik in the

1990s, there was no internet nor cellular phones in the town. I checked my email by weekly trips to the central post office in the city of Cirebon, some 30 kilometers to the southeast, which had several computers with internet access available for rental. I was probably the only person living in Gegesik with an email account. A talk I gave in 1994 to an Islamic student society concerning the radical potential of the internet for local culture was met with laughter and derision—for *internet* was then known only as the name of a building material.

By 2004, this situation had changed. At this time, I was regularly watching wayang streamed live to the World Wide Web by Indonesian television stations (primarily the private station Indosiar) in my home in Glasgow, Scotland. I took a short trip to Cirebon that year, and reported how I was shocked to witness '*sinden* (female vocalists) checking their messages on mobile phones during performances, and even receiving telephone calls.' I noted as well how 'video monitors had become de rigueur at rural *hajatan* (ritual celebrations) in Cirebon so that spectators could watch both the shadow and puppet sides of the screen simultaneously.' Projecting forward, I speculated how 'in years to come Indonesian puppeteers will be communicating with scriptwriters via email, downloading new pieces for *gamelan* on mobile phones, and conferencing with potential sponsors on web cameras. Virtual *wayang* performances in which puppets are manipulated by remotely located puppeteers using animatronics might also arise.'¹⁴ While I have yet to witness the virtual *wayang* performance conjectured, other predictions have come to pass, and then some. I would like to describe and draw some preliminary conclusions regarding some of the more striking developments that have emerged over the last decade.

I start a decade ago not only because I spent 5 months of that year based in Yogyakarta in 2009, studying and participating in the city's lively and cosmopolitan arts scene (both online and in person), but also because this was the moment when Indonesia had its sharpest increase in Facebook users—jumping a thousand fold from 209,760 users in July 2008 to 25,912,960 users in July 2010.¹⁵ Facebook is, and to a great extent remains, the primary point of entry to the World Wide

Web for most Indonesians, and using the internet was in 2009 was referred to colloquially as ‘fooling around with Facebook’ (*main Facebook* in Indonesian, *ndolan Facebook* in Javanese).

Much internet activity related to wayang is by self-proclaimed ‘fans’ of particular puppeteers.¹⁶ These fans upload photos and videos of performances they attend, digitalize and share old commercial audiocassette recordings, advertise upcoming performances and discuss the merits of their favourite puppeteers and the shortcomings of their rivals. They are particularly prominent on YouTube (sometimes funding the livestreaming of their favourite puppeteers) and Facebook, but use other social media platforms as well. Some of the most active fans are in fact guest workers in countries such as Taiwan--- wayang for them acts as a source of familiar solace and cultural belonging in often unwelcoming host countries.

I would hazard that few traditionally-trained artists were Facebook users in 2008, but by 2009 many puppeteers, particularly those located in major cities, were starting to figure out professional and personal uses for Facebook. For many, at least at first, it was significant primarily in reinforcing and widening social circles. So, while living in Yogyakarta for some months in 2009, I regularly began my day with an informal chat with the Yogyakarta puppeteer Seno Nugroho. We would exchange pleasantries and discuss upcoming performances and undertakings—such as archival videos of well-known puppeteers Seno was planning to watch on a particular day from his well-stocked personal library. Sometimes I would comment on performances I had seen. In this way, I achieved some insight into the day-to-day routines of one of Yogyakarta’s most highly regarded and highest paid puppeteers. Seno no doubt felt that he was fulfilling his obligation of being a local host to a puppeteer-scholar visiting his town, from the comfort of his own home.

Some puppeteers, or their managers, post their monthly performances schedules on their Facebook pages, but these are more commonly to be found in public groups devoted to particularly popular puppeteers administered by members of puppeteer fan clubs. Younger puppeteers also are prone to posting photographs of their flashy cars as a way to display their wealth, success and standing.¹⁷ More important for the exchange of information, debate and open philosophical

discussion among puppeteers has been the public group Posko Dalang Nusantara (Commando Post for Puppeteers of the Archipelago) formed on 20 January 2011 by the radical puppeteer Jlitheng Suparman and moderated by him ever since (Fig. 1). Jlitheng is best known for his innovative wayang form, *Wayang Kampung Sebelah* (Wayang from the Neighbourhood Next Door) which narrates politically-critical stories about everyday life, with new figures and new (non-gamelan) music. While coming from a puppeteer family, and trained traditionally by a puppeteer-uncle, his tertiary education in literature introduced him to a critical language which allows him to think about wayang in a contemporary, theoretically-inflected way. Drawing on Martin Heidegger, we might characterize the aim of this radical wayang puppeteer, and other like-minded post-traditional wayang artists, as being to critique the 'wayang system,' sloughing off the restrictions of a century of standardization and academism in order to 'reactivate the tradition' and allow wayang to communicate directly to matters of import to contemporary audiences.¹⁸ The Posko (1386 members as of 23 June 2018) has a similarly critical edge. Its explicit purpose, as stated in the description of the group in Facebook, is to be a 'forum' or a

vehicle for conversation or discussion to unpack all the issues of the world puppetry and look for solutions for them. Anyone can, and is urged to, create a topic as material for discussion/conversation, long or short, in the form of an article or otherwise. In this way, this form will truly be useful for proponents of the art of puppetry (puppeteers, musicians and vocalists) as a vehicle for finding solutions to problems of our Time.¹⁹

I became a member of the Posko in March 2011 at the urging of my friend and colleague Joko Susilo, an Indonesian puppeteer who has been living in New Zealand since the 1990s, who reported what an important source of information on current puppetry discourse it was for him. The forum keeps its edge by regular provocations in the form of polemical essays by Jlitheng, and barbed retorts he occasionally offers to the posting of others. Recent Jlitheng posts have concerned inflated claims for

innovation attributed to certain puppeteers, the need to re-think training and philosophy of wayang as it is now normative for puppeteers to be fully visible and speak directly to audiences rather than through puppets, the need for a clear political vision in public funding for traditional arts, the limits of creative freedom. Sometimes writings are sketches for longer essays to appear in print media, or reproduce an essay Jlitheng has published in a newspaper already. Jlitheng implicitly holds with Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding that participating in a tradition such as wayang is 'a matter of knowing how to go further, and especially how to direct others towards going further, using what can be learned from the tradition afforded by the past to move towards the *telos* of fully perfected work.'²⁰

Wayang is not a singular tradition, and Facebook is a site for encounters between puppets from the past and contemporary practitioners, adherents of different regional traditions and devotees of differing levels of skill and expertise. R. Bima Slamet Raharja, a lecturer in Javanese literature at Gadjah Mada University, actively posts archaic wayang from the different sub-styles of Yogyakarta he encounters in older sets of puppets, manuscript illustrations and archival photographs (Fig. 2). Bima is associated with the royal house of Pakualaman and is charged with conducting the monthly 'airing out' (*ngisis*) of the royal puppets—an arcane ritual not viewable by the public. But outside of this restricted context, he is less a guardian of tradition than an expert, in the terms of Anthony Giddens, eager to disseminate knowledge and skills related to wayang.

In his numerous Facebook posts, Bima comments expertly on wayang craftsmanship, unique features of carving and colouring, affiliation with different princely houses or village traditions, and occasionally poses questions about the characters represented. He also posts photos of puppets (sometimes 'in process') he has commissioned, usually *tedhakan* (literally 'descendants') based on his own sketches of older models.²¹ Posted puppets garner huge admiration from friends and followers, serving to highlight the creativity of past practitioners, the range of traditional practices and the scope of heritage collections located in Yogyakarta and internationally and the abilities of present-day craftspeople. Yogyakarta-style wayang has been a regional tradition in retreat since at

least the 1970s, overwhelmed by the state-backed power of the rival Surakarta regional tradition, and is characterized by a high degree of traditionalization, conservativeness and rigidity. Bima holds up these archival puppets as a means to recognize the creative diversity of Yogyakarta's past, emboldening contemporary practitioners to be more experimental in their interpretation of Yogyakarta tradition. Collections thus are configured as 'creative technologies' for generating new impulses in wayang tradition.²² He is generous in his knowledge—when I was posting photographs from my first survey of the Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets in the Yale University Art Gallery in August-October 2017, he was one of the most active commentators, providing character identifications, names of *wanda* (puppet variants) and puppet makers and important cultural background.²³ Bima is emphatically not a conservator. As is the case for many experts of his calibre, he also deals in puppets, and a large percentage of the old and newly-minted puppets he posts on Facebook are destined for sale, confident that having documented and studied them he is capable also of overseeing the process of them 'having children' (*mutrani*) in the future.

Facebook also serves to highlight and instil respect for the distinct qualities of lesser-known regional styles of wayang. Photographs of an antique set of shadow puppets from Palembang (South Sumatra) posted by the young Palembang puppeteer Novriananda in 2016 were appreciated for the expressiveness of this nearly extinct regional variation. Purjadi, a proponent of the so-called *kidulan* (southern) sub-style of Cirebonese shadow puppet theatre, who has recently been posting suites of photographs of his own performances in village Cirebon on his Facebook page, was questioned by the Yogyakarta-based puppeteer Catur 'Benyek' Kuncoro about why Purjadi uses a microphone on a stand instead of a lapel microphone or a microphone hung around his neck, which is the standard practice in Yogyakarta and Central Java. Purjadi responded that this facilitated certain 'vocal effects' (*efek untuk kebutuhan vocal*) as he could play with distance from the microphone.²⁴ In dialogues such as this, practitioners gain new perspectives on their tradition, and learn to appreciate how certain elements are emphasized over others.

Online wayang videos

Facebook's visual aesthetics tends to emphasize the visual culture of wayang over performance. But this bias is more than compensated for by the thousands of wayang videos uploaded to YouTube and other online video sites. Moving images of wayang before digital video were scarce. Starting in the 1970s, Indonesian television stations regularly aired wayang performances, mostly shot in studios before a live audience, but these were as ephemeral as performances as they were rarely preserved. With the ready availability of affordable camcorders in the 1980s, Indonesian conservatoires and cultural institutes were able to document live performances on their premises. These were internal documents, for the most part, though it was sometimes possible to request copies. While Indonesian stations rarely preserved recordings of performances aired, a number of non-Indonesian initiatives from the 1990s did. The Verbal Art in the Audio-Visual Media of Indonesia project of Leiden University, recorded nearly 150 wayang broadcasts, mostly from the private television station Indosiar, in 1996-2000.²⁵

The advent of the Video Compact Disk (VCD) format in the late 1990s in Indonesia, and online video from the mid-2000s, quickly resulted in the eclipse of audiocassettes as the preferred mode of mediation of wayang. The first wayang VCDs issued in 1999 were elite products aimed at cosmopolitan consumers. A flood of more slipshod VCDs aimed at the mass market, many produced by kitchen-table local publishers, followed. The bulk of these over the last 15 years have been pirated VCDs reproducing recordings of wayang made by local video companies at *hajatan* (family celebrations) and communal celebrations.

Such wayang VCDs, and slightly more upscale DVDs, are still available for purchase from roadside vendors. But, once again, this format is being eclipsed by the newer technology of online videos. A comprehensive search of online puppet videos conducted in September 2004, uncovered only four online wayang videos—all made by or intended for non-Indonesian audiences. YouTube, founded five months later, proved to be a game changer in the creation and distribution of wayang

videos. Existing wayang VCDs were quickly and easily uploaded, mostly, as already indicated, by fans. Teaching tools, such as a series of 1-2 minute videos in which the ‘superstar’ puppeteer and puppetry lecturer Purbo Asmoro demonstrates principles of *sabetan* (puppet movement), could also be uploaded.²⁶ Experimental wayang animations created for or distributed via YouTube, were uploaded by students in technical colleges and universities positioned to communicate with, and make wayang accessible to, non-traditional audiences. But the vast majority of YouTube wayang videos are documents of traditional performances, both excerpts filmed casually by spectators with handheld devices and full-length recordings with multiple cameras and good-quality sound.

YouTube has radically increased access to performances. Among other effects, this has enabled aspiring puppeteers to study puppeteers located some distance away. Purjadi likened his son Devananta Naraya Prasandha, an aspiring puppeteer who idolizes the spectacularly acrobatic puppetry of the Solo-style puppeteer Bayu Aji Pamungkas, whom he has never met but watches avidly on YouTube, to Ekalaya, the tribal warrior in the Mahabharata who claims to be a student of Dorna by virtue of performing daily pujas and practicing martial arts before a Dorna statue. Such long-distance study and observation is contributing significantly to the blurring of regional styles. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Indonesian theatre communities—including local clusters of puppet practitioners in Java and Bali—were much concerned with maintaining the integrity of local styles, which were buttressed through festivals, contests, publications and education.²⁷ Purists complain about the contamination of local performance traditions but it seems impossible to stem the tide of cross-style borrowing prevalent in all western Indonesian wayang forms today.

Many online wayang videos, particularly those from the *pantura* (north coast) region of Java, are uploaded directly by video production companies hired by local hosts to livestream performances they sponsor in conjunction with *hajatan* (mostly rites of passage such as circumcisions and weddings). Pro Media, a small company in rural Subang which specializes in video production and wireless networks, has uploaded thousands of full recordings of performances of traditional arts, including *wayang kulit* and *wayang golek*, alongside videos of graduations,

weddings, reunions and awards ceremonies (Fig. 3). *Hajatan* in this part of Java are funded to a large extent by remittances sent from abroad by family members working in Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and the Gulf states. These munificent relatives are mentioned frequently and prominently in songs in wayang sung by *pesinden* (female vocalists) and in opening speeches. The livestreaming and uploading of these videos thus potentiates their feeling of participation and belonging. Relatively humble hosts in Indramayu and some of the neighbouring regencies are prepared to spend lavishly on top-quality troupes and high-quality videos to insure a good turnout and substantial cash donations from virtually and actually present guests. For scholars of the arts, the videos uploaded to YouTube from village Java provide one of the fullest records of rural arts ever available.

On a typical evening about a dozen Javanese shadow puppet performances from around Java are livestreamed to YouTube. Viewers typically enter these livestreamed performances through particular portals. Indonesian fans of Central Javanese wayang rely on platforms such as the Facebook public group Info Pakeliran Wayang Kulit (Info on *Wayang Kulit* Performances) where links to livestreamed events are posted alongside notices of upcoming performances.²⁸ Fans of the Yogyakarta ‘super-star’ puppeteer Seno Nugroho, who is celebrated for his raucous comedy and sharp political commentary, have their own internet networks. The go-to YouTube channel is PWKS Live (31,663 subscribers as of 13 July 2018), short for *Penggemar Wayang Ki Seno Nugroho Live* (Fans of Ki Seno Nugroho’s Wayang Live), where his performances are regularly streamed and archived. This is complemented by the Facebook public group PWKS (*Penggemar Wayang Ki Seno Nugroho*) where the puppeteer’s monthly schedule is posted so fans know when to tune in or go to see Seno perform live, photos and selfies taken by fans at Seno performances, eFlyers for upcoming performances and other wayang-related posts.

For non-Indonesian wayang devotees, a major source of information for livestreamed performances has been the Indonesian Performing arts listserv. Kitsie Emerson, a Jakarta-based school teacher, amateur gamelan musician and wayang devotee who has been following the

puppeteer Purbo Asmoro since 2004, providing live translation into English when Purbo performs overseas or for foreign guests, has also funded the livestreaming of Purbo's performances, and the performances of some other puppeteers she has translated. Emerson announces these livestreamed performances with scrolling translation/interpretation via the listserv. These are keenly watched by English-speaking viewers around the world while they are being streamed but taken down after the event as Emerson is insistent that her live interpretations are ephemeral and not for posterity.

Livestreaming presents a very different experience of watching wayang than either live performance or recorded video. There is a quality of eventness also experienced in the Metropolitan Opera's Live in HD and National Theatre Live screenings, coupled with feelings of cultural intimacy and a sense of community fostered through the chat function that rolls out comments from viewers. As the performance goes on, viewers 'check in,' typically reporting their location, and offer comments on the performance. An online viewer of a Seno Nugroho performance I attended at the Yogyakarta cultural centre Taman Budaya Yogyakarta (TBY) on 12-13 July 2018 posted on the PWKS Facebook site that he was watching the livestream 'while waiting for my wife's C-section.... I request your well wishes, my friends... hopefully the C-section will go well and the baby and my wife will be healthy.... amen'.²⁹ Others watching online send the puppeteer text messages during performances, which he sometimes reports and comments on in performances. Seno joked at his TBY performance about one such fan who glues his eyelids to stay up all night and watch him. Viewers see the numbers watching online fluctuate as the night (or day, depending on their location) progresses. As is the case for live performances, few watch wayang streams in their entirety—the livestream of the aforementioned Seno Nugroho performance had nearly 40,000 views but typically about 2,000 were watching at any one time. Jan Mrázek, who viewed many of the 150 or so recorded Indosiar wayang broadcasts when he was a postdoctoral scholar with the Verbal Art in the Audio-Visual Media of Indonesia project of Leiden University, researching wayang on television, recounted in conversations the fatigue and loneliness he experienced in watching recorded wayang on a television monitor by

himself. There is, in contrast, a sense of anticipation and excitement at being part of an internationally-dispersed viewing body in livestreamed wayang.

This sense of being part of an audience is reinforced by puppeteers in performance, who will announce in comical interludes the cities outside of Java and foreign countries where online viewers are located. So, during the first comical interlude (*Limbukan*) in a performance of a ritual drama, part of an annual village cleaning rite addressing and placating local spirits connected to agriculture, Seno Nugroho referenced online viewers watching in Japan and America.³⁰ Seno retains and actively courts his local devotees—about 80% of his performances are in Yogyakarta and its environs—but draws cachet from his extra-local appeal on the web, in much the same way that he points out, invites onstage and engages in conversations with foreign viewers attending live performances in person.³¹

Ephemerality and connectivity

The lines separating live and web performances are increasingly fuzzy. At Seno's TBY performance, all of the nine *pesinden* lined up to the puppeteer's right were busy with their mobile phones during the longer dialogue and fighting scenes, when they were not required to sing (Fig. 4). None took or made phone calls: they understood the importance of maintaining decorum. But they were using Facebook, texting on WhatsApp, taking selfies and using their phones in place of mirrors to fix their makeup and hair. Spectators were also busy with their phones and other handheld devices, illuminating the area around the stage in a way that Seno described in one of the comical interludes as a sea of red lights. And during longer musical pieces (*gendhing*), moments in which *dhalang* in the past might enjoy a cigarette or a cup of hot tea, Seno himself was often looking at his own mobile phone, ever at his side, for input and comments from fans and friends. Increasingly wayang is becoming a code/space, an environment coproduced by computation and 'mediated through connectivity and algorithmic revision'; performances are meaningful to the extent they can be

announced on Facebook, streamed and archived on YouTube, and serve as backdrops for selfies taken by both performers and spectators (Fig. 5).³²

On the Facebook site of the livestreaming company Pro Media, the company explains that its emblem, a multi-coloured circle or ring, ‘symbolizes lastingness and the quality of protection, giving the impression of dynamism, rotation, speed, repetition, continuity, without beginning or end, eternal, eminent, trustworthy, perfection, and life.’³³ The most affecting online videos related to wayang are not of lively performances affirming the continuity of tradition, however, but videos (accompanied inevitably by texts, email messages, newspaper articles, Facebook postings and other electronic communications) announcing the deaths of friends from wayang networks. Videos showing the sudden death on 16 April 2018 of the Gegesik puppeteer Suherman Alim Basyirun (1970-2018), popularly known as Herman Basari, were personally the most shocking, the greatest reminder that networks are built of people who do have an end, who are not eternal and prone to imperfections in the ways they lived and died.

Herman, at the time of his death, was coaching a group of students aged 12 to 15 in his *sanggar* (studio) in Gegesik for an upcoming gamelan performance as part of a provincial celebration of Indonesia’s national education and sports day. Next door was an abandoned house that had been converted into a bird’s nest factory; the owner had recently elevated its walls to increase production (without planning permission, it turned out).³⁴ The wall of this factory collapsed and Herman, his son and assistant Arid (1996-2018) and five of their students in the class were crushed to death. The outpouring of support was instant—with money from Indonesia’s President, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the puppeteer union Pepadi; full scholarship offers to Herman’s surviving children from the conservatoires; national news coverage and expressions of sympathy on Facebook and other social media.

Funerals in village Java are quick affairs—people are buried on the day they die with minimal spectacle—but are nonetheless meaningful rites of passage to the extent they knit together families, friends and acquaintances in acts of collective remembering. Herman’s death, in contrast, played out

over the protracted period of a news cycle; details about the victims, the cause of their death and the responses from local and national institutions and actors trickled in over several days. I could not tear myself away from the grim spectacle. Herman had worked as my assistant in the late 1990s and we had both understudied as ‘afternoon puppeteers’ (*dhalang awan*) to his father Basari in 1999. Herman had been responsible for producing the first draft of the transcript of a performance of the ritual drama *Barikan* for one of my books and I had acted in a variety of ways to stimulate his career as a puppeteer.³⁵ We were close enough for him to have named one of his children after my own daughter. While I have only rarely visited Gegesik since completing my postdoctoral field studies there in 2000, I communicated with both Herman and his younger brother Tono (a puppeteer living in Indramayu) through email and Facebook over the years.

As I watched online videos of rescue workers looking for bodies amidst the rubble, sense memories of my years of living in Gegesik flooded in-- the pungency of burning rice straw at harvest times, the smack of sweet tea and hot cassavas, the wave of relaxation after a massage, the sounds of street vendors, the sweltering heat in my study as I worked on a transcript with Herman and other assistants and the relief of cool night air. I gazed at the faces of the townspeople who crowded around the periphery of the demolished studio as the rescue operation proceeded, scanning the crowd for people I had once known, and wondering if anyone present would recognize me today. I fantasized about teleporting into the scene, and at the same time was grateful I was nowhere near the disaster site.

Purjadi, who attended Herman’s funeral in the company of VIP guests in his capacity as current head of Cirebon’s Pepadi chapter, captioned his photographs of the funeral he posted on Facebook: ‘Farewell my friend, Puppeteer Suherman... Hopefully your path will be lit up...’ (*selamat jalan sahabatku dalang Suherman... Semoga terang jalanmu...*).³⁶ I experienced Purjadi’s presence at the funeral as a surrogate for my own, and his elegant words brought comfort and concisely expressed with far more grace anything I might post on my own Facebook page.

Claire Holt argues of wayang that ‘the shadow’s faith is acceptance of the immutable order of things; the shadows’ will strives to enhance their power, to gain possession of the desired mate, to defend their domain, to make their universe secure.’³⁷ Wayang’s power over desired proponents remains evident in contemporary Indonesia, with many practitioners and fans striving to secure a place for wayang in *jaman now*. But wayang today is hardly immutable; it is fully part of the globalized world, with all its affordances, excesses and shortcomings. In the first comical interlude of his TBY performance, Seno queried why this article’s author, a professor of theatre from London, with all London’s advanced technology at his disposal, would possibly be interested in a medium such as wayang. His jokey response was that Indonesia was also technologically advanced, proof being that a single motor-scooter can be disassembled for parts, effectively multiplying it into a dozen clones. We might extrapolate from Seno’s one-liner that such also is the case of wayang in the age of digital reproduction—old puppets are having children, debates are being aired and rejoined internationally, audiences are extended, the scope for celebrating and mourning together is increased. At the same time, these digital media are being domesticated in a DIY and very self-aware fashion—a process of reflexive traditionalization. It is clear that wayang practice remains grounded in local conditions and at the same time responsive to shifting media technologies, changing beliefs, expanding social networks, and evolving noetic economies. Performed in the dark, it lights up this transitory world, and charts what comes after.

Figures



Figure 1. Facebook page of Posko Dalang Nusantara (Commando Post for Puppeteers of the Nusantara)

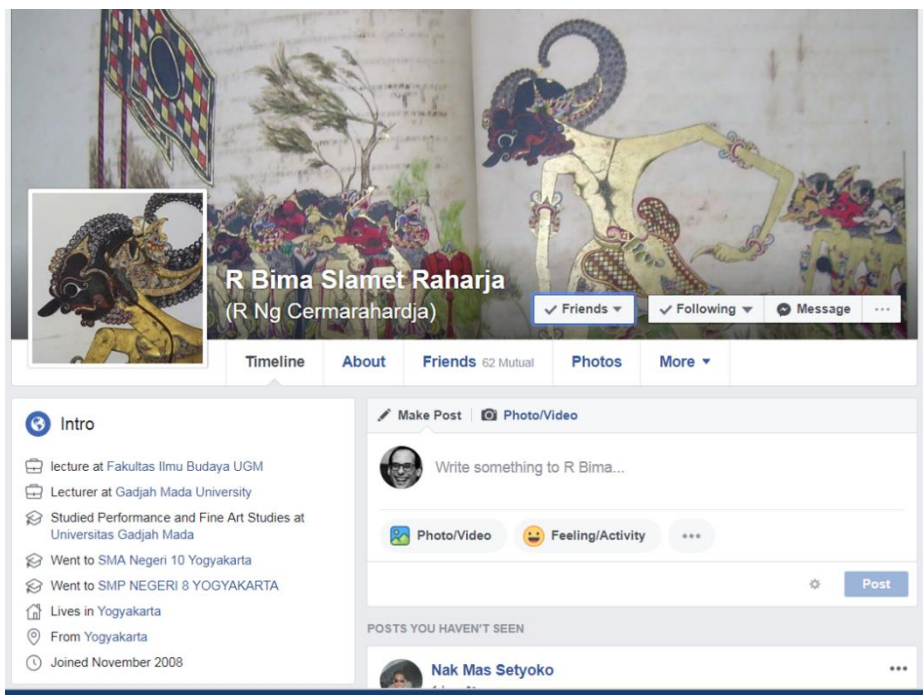


Figure 2. Facebook page of R Bima Slamet Raharja.

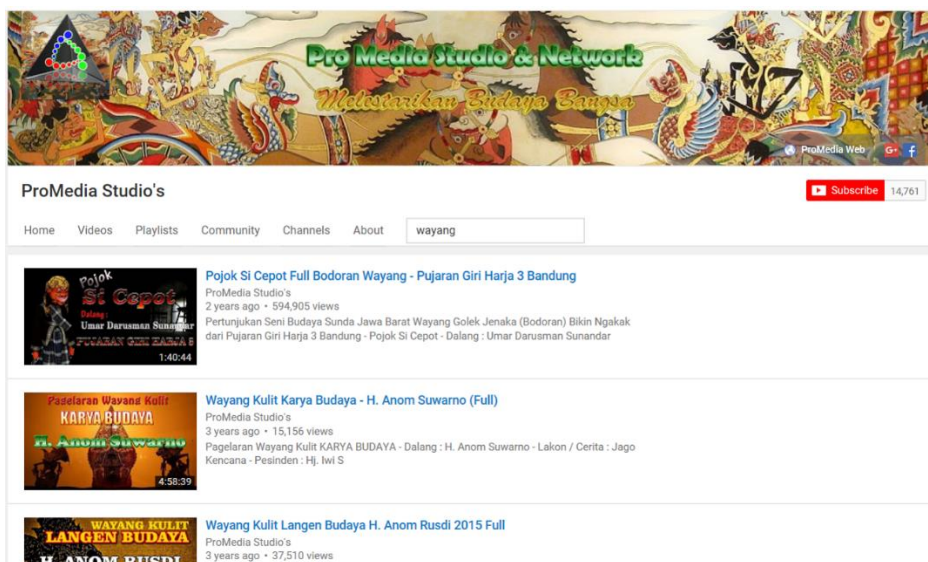


Figure 3. YouTube channel of ProMedia Studio & Network.



Figure 4. *Pesindhen* (female vocalists) looking at their mobile phones in a performance by puppeteer Seno Nugroho at the Yogyakarta cultural centre Taman Budaya Yogyakarta (TBY) on 12-13 July 2018.

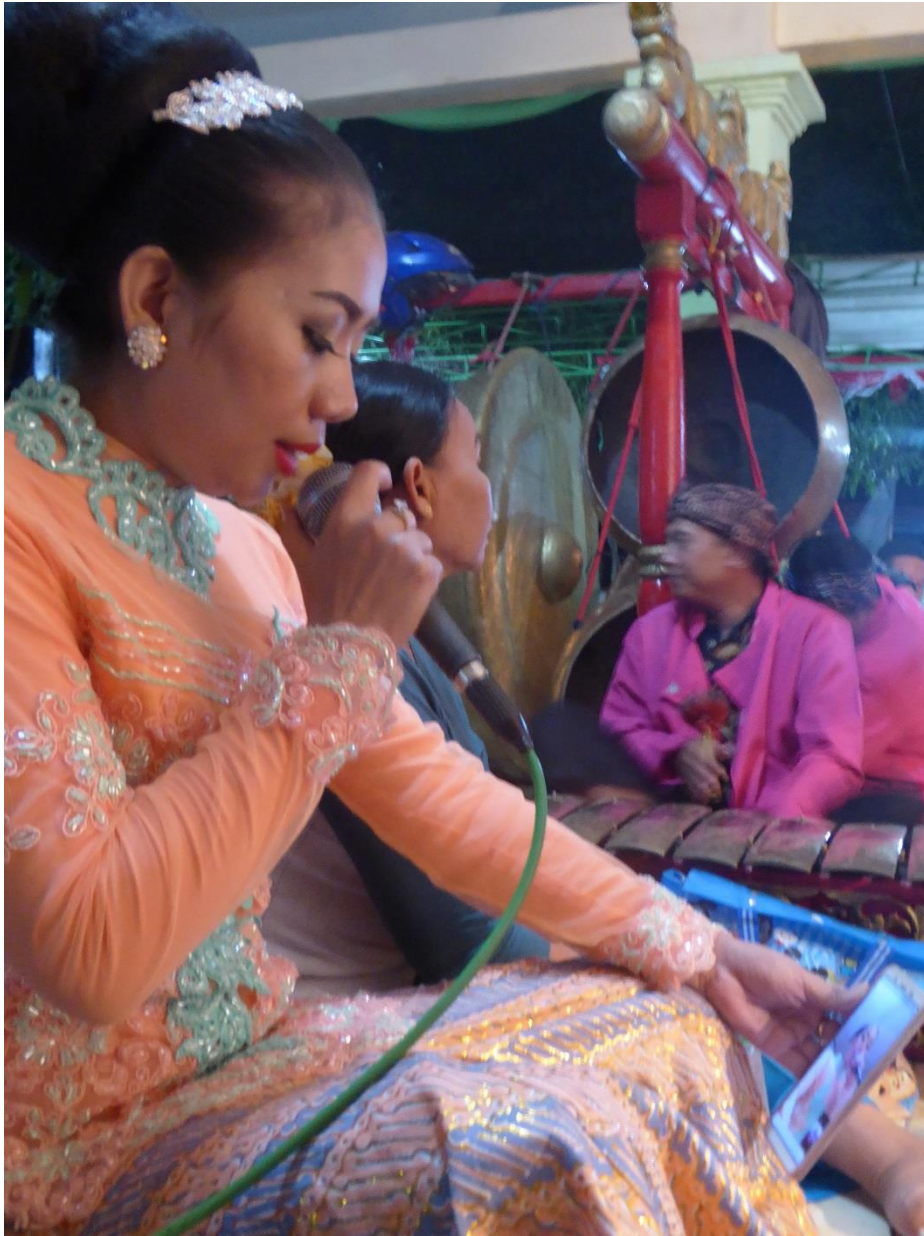


Figure 5. The *pesindhen* (female vocalist) Nyi Siti Julekha filming herself on her mobile while singing at a performance by the puppeteer Purjadi in the village of Kondangsari (Cirebon) on 22-23 July 2018.

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1981]), p. 156.

² Scott Lash, 'Reflexivity and its Doubles: Structure, Aesthetics, Community' in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 110-73, p. 126

³ Matthew Isaac Cohen, 'Traditional and Post-Traditional *Wayang* in Java Today' in Dassia Posner, John Bell and Claudia Orenstein, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 178-91 and Matthew Isaac Cohen, 'Global Modernities and Post-Traditional Shadow Puppetry in Contemporary Southeast Asia', *Third Text* 31, 3 (2017): 188-206.

⁴ Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). *Wayang* in Indonesia is of course perceived differently than it is outside of its country of origin. Most Indonesians view *wayang* as part of local heritage, and are unlikely to have any knowledge of its variability across different ethnic groups, nor how *wayang* has changed over time. *Wayang* devotees, in contrast, appreciate *wayang* precisely to the extent that it can address contemporary issues—for them *wayang* is fully coeval with other media and social life—and how it expresses their own local ethnic identity (Sundanese, Cirebonese, North Balinese etc.).

⁵ For a thorough critique of the misreading of the concept of *rasa* in Richard Schechner's training method *Rasaboxes™*, see David Mason, 'Rasa, 'Rasaesthetics' and Dramatic Theory as Performance Packaging' *Theatre Research International* 31, 1 (2006), 69-83.

⁶ John Milbank, 'MacIntyre on Tradition', in David Marshall, ed., *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 157-168, pp. 163, 165.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative and the philosophy of science' *The Monist* 60, 4: 453-472, p. 460.

⁸ On the distinction between experts and guardians of tradition, see Anthony Giddens, 'Living in a Post-Traditional Society', in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 56-109, pp. 64-6.

⁹ Howard S. Becker, Michal M. McCall, Lori V. Morris and Paul Meshejian, 'Theatres and Communities: Three Scenes' *Social Problems* 36, 2 (1989): 93-116, p. 93.

¹⁰ On Gegesik as a target of development, see Buddy Prasadja, *Pembangunan Desa dan Masalah Kepemimpinannya* (Jakarta: Rajawali, 1974).

¹¹ Discussion with Basari, 20 July 1997. Basari went on to say that without books he would be *repot* or 'in trouble.' Basari frequently borrowed and photocopied books from me. Well before him, Ki Arma, who lived in the neighbouring village of Kalideres but was considered a Gegesik puppeteer, was a consumer of wayang books published in Central Java, and introduced new dramaturgies into the local Gegesik wayang style based on his reading. Arma's use of non-local sources was said to have 'ruined' (*rusak*) the local wayang style, in the opinion of one senior Gegesik puppeteer. Discussion with Wituk, 16 November 1997.

¹² Personal communication with Jan Mrázek.

¹³ Matthew Isaac Cohen, 'Contemporary Wayang in Global Contexts', *Asian Theatre Journal* 24, 2 (2007): 338-369 and Matthew Isaac Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Cohen, 'Contemporary Wayang', p. 364.

¹⁵ <https://www.techinasia.com/why-facebook-is-so-popular-in-indonesia>, accessed 23 June 2018.

¹⁶ In internet discourse, the English loan word *fan* is used alongside the Indonesian equivalent, *penggemar*.

¹⁷ Discussion with Dewanto Sukistono, 15 July 2018.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, cited in Simon Critchley, 'You Are Not Your Own: On the Nature of Faith', in A. Welchman, ed., *Politics of Religion/Religions of Politics* (Boston: Springer, 2014), pp. 10-27, p. 12. On Jliteng's peer, the late Slamet Gundono, see Miguel Escobar Varela, 'Heirlooms of the Everyday: The Material Performances of Slamet Gundono', *Theatre Research International* 41, 1 (2016), pp. 53-69.

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- ¹⁹ About this Group: Description, *Posko Dalang Nusantara*, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/180670111974000/about/>, accessed 23 June 2018.
- ²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 65-6.
- ²¹ Bima is a talented shadow puppet carver and colourist, but finds these crafts (particularly carving) too time-consuming and normally farms out puppet making to other Yogyakarta artisans.
- ²² On museum artefacts as creative technologies see Nicholas Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity: What Museums are Good for in the 21st Century* (London: Reaktion, 2016).
- ²³ On the Angst collection, see Matthew Isaac Cohen, 'The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets: The Structure of the Conjuncture', *Asian Theatre Journal* 35, 2 (2018).
- ²⁴ Facebook posting by Dalang Purjadi, 'Mlm ini manggung di ds. Bobos, Dukupuntang' 22 June 2018.
- ²⁵ These VHS cassettes were only available to watch in Leiden, however. Other academic projects in the 1990s involving recording wayang include the South and Southeast Asia Video Archive based at the University of Wisconsin Madison and the Balinese Television Project, a collaboration between the Indonesian conservatoire STSI Denpasar and SOAS, University of London.
- ²⁶ See e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDz3ZCwdCgg>. These videos were originally made for Senawangi, the national wayang organization. Kuwato, another ISI lecturer, provides the voiceover narration. On Purbo Asmoro, see Kathryn Emerson, *Transforming Wayang for Contemporary Audiences: Dramatic Expression in Purbo Asmoro's Style, 1989–2015* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2016).
- ²⁷ On the maintenance of performance norms through contest, with specific reference to Sundanese *wayang golek*, see Andrew N. Weintraubm 'Contest-ing Culture: Sundanese Wayang Golek Purwa Competitions in New Order Indonesia' *Asian Theatre Journal* 18, no. 1 (2001): 87-104.
- ²⁸ This group has 22,142 members as of 1 July 2018.

²⁹ Posted by ‘Benzema Jhidade Menyonyoe’ on 13 July 2018 from RSUD Panembahan Senopati Bantul. For a full recording of this performance, see *Pagelaran Wayang Ki Seno Nugroho Lakon: WAHYU TRIANGGA* (https://youtu.be/QkNI_LY6Kek).

³⁰ *Pagelaran Wayang Kulit Ki Seno Nugroho Lakon MIKUKUHAN*, performed for the Bersih Dusun Gunturan in the hamlet of Gunturan, Triharjo, Pandak, Bantul, Yogyakarta on 13-14 July 2019. See https://youtu.be/_7jgnQXaO-4

³¹ So, at Seno’s performance at TBY, Seno asked my PhD student Sietske Rijpkema and me to sing songs from the wayang repertoire; Sutrisno Hartana, a gamelan teacher and performing arts scholar based in Canada who has been following Seno for years, played *gender* briefly; and a spectator from Sumatra who has been spending the last month attending wayang performances around Yogyakarta was also hailed.

³² James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018), n.p. Bridle takes the term ‘code/space’ from the discipline of geography, defining it as an ‘interweaving of computation with the built environment and daily experience [...] such that the environment and the experience of it actually cease to function in the absence of code.’ Bridle’s prime example is the airport—when systems crash it instantly transforms ‘into a huge shed filled with empty people’ (n.p.)—but argues that with the ubiquity of smart phones and other smart devices increasingly the entire world is becoming a code/space.

³³ https://www.facebook.com/pages/story/reader/?page_story_id=1689979914346159, posted 29 April 2018 and accessed 24 June 2018.

³⁴ Edible bird’s nest are a Chinese delicacy and a lucrative business: Wikipedia reports that exports account for 0.5% of Indonesia’s GDP. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edible_bird%27s_nest

³⁵ Basari, *Demon Abduction: A Wayang Ritual Drama from West Java*, trans. Matthew Isaac Cohen (Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 1999).

³⁶ Facebook post by Purjadi on 16 April 2018.

³⁷ Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 149.